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AUTHOR Avery, Robert K.
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ABSTRACT

An investigation of the functions performed by talk radio programs involved in-depth interviews with 184 call-in listeners to one such program over a seven-day period. During the interviews, the callers listened to tape recordings of their conversations with the program host to help them focus on the motivation that prompted their calls, the feelings of satisfaction or frustration associated with the communication, and their general reactions to the event. Callers also answered a series of questions eliciting their listening habits, host and topic preferences, perceptions of talk radio, and demographic information. The findings revealed that the primary function served by talk radio programing was that of interpersonal contact. Closely tied with this function was the therapeutic function--the need of callers to be reinforced in their views and values. Other functions served by talk radio that emerged included: entertainment, ombudsman, and information provider. (FL)

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Department of Communication
University of Utah

A FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF TALK RADIO:

A CASE STUDY

Presented at the Annual Convention of the
Broadcast Education Association, Las Vegas, April 11, 1980

Robert K. Avery
Associate Professor
Radio-TV-Film Coordinator

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Introduction

That "talk" or "two-way" radio has demonstrated its success within the array of contemporary radio program formats is well documented. In a special report on talk radio which was published in a 1966 issue of Broadcasting, writers estimated that over 80% of all AM radio stations included some form of talk format in their regular broadcast day. More recent radio reports appearing in Broadcasting and other trade publications continue to confirm talk radio as a viable and growing form of programming.

Actually, the label "talk radio" means different things to different people, as the diversity of talk formats is evident from station to station, and even from one program to another within a given station. Programs vary greatly in terms of content, style, announcer type, time of day, and day of the week. Attention given to other forms of programming -- music, news, sports -- also has an impact on the form and placement of talk segments. The very fact that the talk format can be tailored to fit the unique characteristics of a station's market speaks well for its flexibility and relative success. However, the unique features of talk radio make it difficult to generalize research findings regarding talk host type, host-caller interactions, and audience characteristics from one program to another, let alone across different stations. In addition, most findings which relate to listener composition, demographics and motivations are derived from interviews with individuals who call the talk radio station, rather than being drawn from a random sample of listeners. There is at least some evidence which suggests that those who are actually prompted to call an on-air host are not at all representative of the "typical" talk radio listener.

Avery and Ellis (1979) found that comments from call-in listeners revealed three general phases of caller participation. The first phase is one of aroused curiosity when the listener is introduced to talk radio by a friend, a promotional announcement, or perhaps a chance turning of the dial. Many listeners claim that their initial impression is one of amazement as they marvel at the assortment of "kooks," "crackpots," and "crazys" who call the radio station. Depending on the needs of the listener and the perceived functions performed by talk radio, the first phase varies greatly in length. The second phase might be described as one of passive involvement. No longer is talk radio simply a novelty which can be easily discounted. The continuous flow of information and opinion provided by the two-way medium becomes an important part of the listener's environment. It is at this point that listeners report that they are "hooked" on talk radio. Many regular members of the talk radio audience will never move beyond the second phase. However, when listeners become motivated enough to call the talk show host, they enter into a third phase of active participation. In a study by Bierig (1977), it was reported that over 16% of the callers interviewed could be classified as frequent callers. However, the largest percentage of call-in listeners (45%) stated that they had not previously called a talk program, though some had listened for many years. Over 17% had not called for a year or more. Hence it is reasonable to assume that some listeners may actively participate in talk radio very rarely, but will continue to maintain passive (vicarious) involvement over long periods.

Theoretical Orientation

Although there is little agreement as to the exact roots of talk radio, it can be easily traced to the early telephone quiz programs of the 1930s. Such programs featured calls to the listening audience, who were given an opportunity to win prizes by correctly answering the moderator's questions. During the 1950s, radio yielded its role as the "family medium" to television. As radio was transformed from a national network-dominated industry to a localized medium, new formats evolved that would attempt to attract specific segments of the total listening audience. Billing itself as a "go where you go, do what you do medium," radio moved out of the living room and into cars, bathrooms, workshops, kitchens, and virtually every other place where people could be found. In 1964, Mendelsohn reported that ". . . radio functions as a diverting 'companion,' and it helps to fill voids that are created by (1) routine and boring tasks and (2) feelings of social isolation and loneliness." (p. 242) Stated more formally, Mendelsohn identified four primary functions served by the aural medium: (1) Utilitarian information and news, (2) Active mood accompaniment, (3) Release from psychological tension and pressure, and (4) Friendly companionship. While the extent to which a given format succeeds in serving these functions varies greatly, Mendelsohn argues that radio permits the listener to participate vicariously in activities and events which would not be possible otherwise.

It has also been suggested that in addition to affording an important form of vicarious participation, radio serves an agenda-setting function for interpersonal communication with family, friends and business associates.

Mendelsohn refers to this facilitation of human interaction as the "social lubricating function" of radio. (1964, p. 245) As explained by Chaffee (1972, p. 100), "One can seek information via the media without exposing his ignorance on a subject; thus prepared, he can enter more confidently into interpersonal conversation." The rash of sex-oriented or "topless" radio programs of the early 1970s, such as Bill Balance's "Feminine Forum" (KGBS, Los Angeles) and Don Chamberlain's "California Girls" (KNEW, San Francisco), are said to have provided a form of interpersonal communication between caller and talk host which was both "cathartic" and "therapeutic." (Carlin, 1976)

Other writers, especially from the fields of mental health and clinical psychology, refer to the therapeutic functions of two-way or talk radio. With growing fragmentation within the traditionally defined family unit and loneliness becoming an endemic problem throughout our society, there is a very real need for surrogate or substitute relationships. The talk radio host can function as a friend to individuals who are unable to initiate and sustain interpersonal relationships on their own. People of all ages and from all walks of life frequently need to be reminded that their existence has meaning, and that their problems and frustrations are shared by others.

Finally, talk radio stations and their respective on-air hosts vary greatly in bringing about corrective actions or social changes within their communities. Some talk radio formats include such features as "Action Line" or "Help Line" to focus attention on perceived problems by call-in listeners. Other stations point with pride to specific instances when a talk host or "communicaster."

actually prevented an individual from commiting a crime, attempting suicide, or engaging in an anti-social activity.

Taken collectively, the various functions purportedly performed by talk radio can be summarized in a variety of ways. However, for purposes of this preliminary investigation, those functions derived from the literature on talk radio have been categorized as follows: (1) Interpersonal Contact, (2) Information/Correlation, (3) Entertainment, (4) Therapeutic, and (5) Ombudsman. While these classifications are not intended as being either exhaustive or mutually exclusive, they did provide a means by which the data generated by this study could be organized and discussed.

Method

Findings reported in the following section of this paper were derived primarily from a random sample of 743 call-in listeners who participated on two-way radio station KSXX, Salt Lake City, during a seven-day survey period. A total of 184 in-depth interviews, utilizing a stimulated recall technique, were completed within twenty-four hours from the time the listener called into the station. This sample of call-in listeners represented 24.8% of all listeners who participated on talk radio during the survey period. A conscious attempt was made to keep the number of interviews for each period of the broadcast day fairly proportionate to the corresponding number of call-in listeners. All callers who participated in the study agreed to the follow-up interview prior to being put through to one of the six talk hosts who worked on-air during the survey week. At the time of the interview, callers listened

to a tape recording of all or a portion (depending on length) of the conversation with the talk radio host. The purpose of recreating the interaction was to help the respondent focus in on the motivation which prompted the call, feelings of satisfaction and/or frustration associated with the communication experience, and general reactions and observations regarding the event. Once the caller had exhausted all responses to the host-caller interaction, a series of questions regarding the caller's listening habits, host and topic preferences, perceptions of talk radio, and demographic information were initiated.

These primary data were augmented with an additional eleven in-depth interviews which were prompted by the author's appearance on several talk radio programs where he was asked to discuss his research interests regarding talk radio. At the conclusion of each of the programs, listeners were invited to call the author at his office and share their personal insights about two-way radio. Four of the eleven volunteer interviewees stated that they had never called a talk radio station, thus constituting the only non-callers to contribute to this study. Overall, 195 listeners participated in the research effort. The following section is an attempt to briefly summarize the observations of these respondents. No attempt was made to perform quantitative comparisons by category since respondents were free to discuss any or all of the functions reported below.

FUNCTIONS

Interpersonal Contact

No other function of talk radio has received more research attention than that of interpersonal contact. The findings of the present investigation

suggest that such attention is warranted, as this function was the one emphasized most often by respondents. Without question, both listening and active participation on talk radio serves as a substitute for interpersonal contact with friends, family, and colleagues. While the most dramatic responses came from individuals who were blind, physically disabled, or without any close family or friends, the interpersonal function of talk radio is of obvious benefit to housewives, factory workers, and college students as well. Consistent with Turow's (1974) findings, however, many of the callers in this study were individuals who could not acquire psychic resources (i.e., personal attention, love, comfort) through normal interpersonal contact. The desire to "share one's point of view," "set the record straight," or "put in my two cents worth" were seen as attempts to achieve the satisfaction associated with interpersonal contact rather than excite others to action, as argued by Crittenden (1971). Just listening to talk radio is perceived as providing relief from feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Support for the position that interpersonal contact is the primary motive associated with calling a talk radio host can be found in the relationship between talk host type and listener profile. Although more than 72% of the callers claimed to listen to most of the hosts on talk radio nearly every day, nearly all respondents could identify a clear favorite communicaster. More importantly, most callers claimed to talk only with their favorite, while few call-in listeners had talked with more than two of the hosts. Listeners apparently develop a strong alliance with one or perhaps two of the on-air personalities, considering him/her to be a good friend. Numerous respondents stated that they listened throughout the day, but would not think of calling the other hosts.

Probing of the respondents yielded statements about the non-favorite hosts' on-air style, personality and beliefs. Consistent with an earlier study which employed an interaction analysis to assess patterns of communication on talk radio (Avery, Ellis and Glover, 1978), responses from call-in listeners suggest that talk host type is probably the single most important variable in motivating listeners to participate in two-way radio.

Listeners to a talk radio station develop a sense of community. Many regular listeners indicated that they know who will call whenever certain topics are brought up, and also have a good notion as to what these callers will contribute to the discussion. Respondents noted that they know many of the call-in listeners by the sound of their voice, and realize that they too can be easily recognized. Some callers become such frequent participants that talk hosts or other listeners will give them nicknames in much the same vein as CB radio users take on "handles." Receiving a nickname or handle is often viewed as a form of status conferral within the talk radio community. Respondents also revealed the existence of several small groups within the Salt Lake market which came into being in direct response to talk radio participation. One such group of about twenty-five women, aged 50 and over, meet every two weeks during their favorite talk host's program to sew, knit, chat, and listen to talk radio. Similarly, one segment of the Sunday broadcast day, titled "Help Radio," established a community of individuals who maintained an exchange of contacts and assistance throughout the week. People needing medical deliveries, groceries, pet sitting, and numerous other acts of assistance have received help from listeners to "Help Radio." However, for most

listeners, talk radio affords a communication network among individuals who may never physically meet, but who share interests, experiences and concerns on a regular basis. For other listeners, many of whom have ready access to a wide range of interpersonal contacts among family, friends and associates, talk radio performs an "agenda setting" function. That is, it provides listeners with a sampling of public opinion, and suggests topics for discussion among one's own personal acquaintances.

Information/Correlation

As suggested by such writers as Lasswell, Wright and Mendelsohn, the media not only report on what is happening in the world (news), but also help us understand the significance of those events (interpretation or editorial). Respondents representing all demographic categories included in the study emphasized the importance of talk radio in giving them a broader perspective on the news. Although some listeners claimed to tune in a particular talk host who holds different political or religious views "in order to know what the crazys are up to," most respondents stated that talk radio affords a wide spectrum of viewpoints and perspectives which cannot be derived from any other mass medium. The strongest advocates for information/correlation being the most important function served by talk radio were from the 18-34 age group. Not surprisingly, these individuals were among those who were most likely to become involved in discussions regarding national affairs, foreign policy and other political issues. They were also among the most frequent callers to the talk host who represented a liberal point of view.

Hilly Rose, writing in his recent book, But That's Not What I Called About, also supports the position that talk show hosts have high credibility as informed sources. In his words, "Radio listeners trust a good talk show host. He reads much more than most people have time to read, and he has access to first-hand sources that many prime-time news shows ignore due to time limitations." (Rose, 1978, p. 4)

Entertainment

Although the literature on talk radio frequently fails to recognize the lighter moments associated with this program format, listener responses clearly indicate that two-way radio fulfills a purely entertainment function. Admittedly, this is a rather abstract description, but the fact that listeners tune in their favorite talk host for pure enjoyment cannot be ignored. Interestingly, this function was identified most frequently by homemakers who comprise the majority of the listening audience during the early afternoon. The talk host for this time period on KSXX can be described as "light conversational." An avid supporter of theatre and the arts, this host excels in the discussion of topics which are of specific interest to the woman of the house. He frequently generates call-in responses by reciting selections of poetry or providing a favorite recipe. The group of listeners which ranked second in their identification of the entertainment function were men between 35 and 49 who called the station during the weekend. Since weekend hosts were not nearly as well established as on-air personalities, and hence did not afford long enough periods for detailed analysis, data resulting from weekend

listening were pooled. Among the weekend program features were "Tradio," a form of on-air swap shop, and "Sports Quiz." Both of these features attract a larger than normal proportion of middle-aged male listeners who claim to tune in for both information and entertainment. In contrast to talk radio in the Salt Lake City market, two-way formats in such large metropolitan areas as Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, and New York, make much more extensive use of well-known celebrities. One could easily speculate that where such popular figures are frequently used, listeners would be attracted by the program's pure entertainment value.

Therapeutic

Closely tied to the need for interpersonal contact is the therapeutic function. Previous research has supported the contention that many listeners, and an even larger proportion of callers, need to be reassured about their personal beliefs, values and opinions. Hence, the communication patterns of a substantial number of caller-host interactions can be described as providing reinforcement for the caller's point of view (Avery, Ellis and Glover, 1978). As explained by one avid listener, "Some people call in just to hear themselves talk, but there are a lot of folks who really need to be told that they're doing OK." The fact that many listeners call a talk radio host for reinforcement helps to explain the high correlation between the political and social orientations of the host and that of the caller. As more psychological research is done on the therapeutic functions served by talk radio, we will gain a better understanding of the interpersonal needs of its audience.

Ombudsman

Reference was made to "Help Radio" in the first section of this discussion. Certainly the corps of volunteers and station representatives activated by such a program format would not only have a positive impact on the community, but would undoubtedly raise the quality of life for the participants themselves. While it is true that this function was the one mentioned least frequently by the Salt Lake respondents, this might well be attributed to the kind of format which was available at the time the study was conducted. That it was mentioned at all is probably significant. The growing need for alternative feedback mechanisms within our modern society suggests that this function will probably increase, rather than decrease in importance. Whether a radio station actively attempts to resolve the complaints and frustrations of listeners may not be as significant as the opportunity to address the issue in a public forum. Listeners often mentioned that problems which got resolved were first brought out on talk radio. They point to the fact that local politicians have someone keep an ear to the radio so that they can call in a response if their territory or jurisdiction receives negative criticism. Unenforced parking restrictions, noise ordinances, animal control, pornographic magazine sales, and door to door solicitation are among the problems which listeners felt had been at least partially resolved as a direct result of open discussion and debate over two-way radio.

There are obviously other functions which talk radio serves, and probably a number of dysfunctions as well. Yet the open-ended responses generated by the 195 interviews completed for this study could generally be

categorized within one or more of the five classifications outlined above. As noted at the offset, the present report shares a limitation with most of the research in this area in that the functions revealed are almost solely the products of the call-in listener. What other functions might be derived from a similar study of non-callers is presently unknown. However, Rose is of the opinion that the handful of active participants are not representative of the passive listeners (1978, p. 78):

> While there is not a great body of scientific research concerning callers (as opposed to listeners), the information that does exist indicates callers are less affluent, many are handicapped, and they are frequently lonely. Before reporting on this body of caller research, it should be pointed out that this does not necessarily reflect a profile of listeners. I have had scores of letters from doctors, lawyers, college professors, business executives, bankers, and other upper strata citizens who feel it unprofitable for them to call and wait their turn.

Building on the body of available research in 1975, we initiated a systematic program of research dealing with talk radio. While that effort is far from being completed, the findings which have been produced during the past five years from an ever-growing corps of researchers is giving us new insights. Our next major thrust must be to tap that large segment of the audience which, for whatever reason, chooses not to call. Only then will the mosaic become more nearly complete.

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